

## Persevering Pilgrims

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: "For yet a little while, *And* He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; But if *anyone* draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul (Heb. 10:32-39).

During the Middle Ages, many people in Europe believed that one of the greatest good works they could perform was to make a pilgrimage to a holy site or shrine in Europe or even to Israel, or Palestine as it was then called. They thought that a physical journey to these places would bring them merit or indulgences from the church. In some cases they hoped that simply visiting these places would effect a change within them.

Getting there was often costly, difficult and dangerous. But setting out and reaching the destination was deeply entrenched in the Christian mind, because the Bible itself uses that image of the Christian life. Christians are said to be pilgrims, leaving one place, and making their way to another. The journey is difficult, costly, and dangerous. But true pilgrims are determined to persevere until they reach the destination.

I wonder if Pilgrim's Progress could have been written in our century and ever become well-known. Modern Christianity is not much of a pilgrim Christianity. Ours is a Christianity that wants to make a Heaven of this world, that wants the journey to become the destination. To be noticed in our world, you couldn't name it Pilgrim's Progress; you'd have to name it *Settler's Satisfaction*, or *Dweller's Delight*.

But that is exactly why we see so many falling into the very warnings of Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10: turning back, drawing back, casting away confidence.

Now sometimes what the writer does after a severe warning against apostasy is to contrast that with the nature and actions of true believers. He shows the terrifying result of apostasy, but then he turns around and says, "But this is not you, my brethren." in chapter 6, he said, " 9 But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. 10 For God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. (Heb. 6:9-10)

Now he does the same thing here. He says, but you are not those people, brethren. You are true believers. In essence, he says in this passage, you are persevering pilgrims. So he comforts them by exhorting them to do three things that persevering pilgrims do. This comfort functions exactly like the warnings do. To true believers, it is a road sign to tell them what to do. To second and third soil professors, it is a taste of what real Christianity is like. Either way, it says, be a true Christian. Be a persevering pilgrim. So what do persevering pilgrims do?

### I. Remember Your Willing Sacrifice

32 But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings:

33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34 for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.

You must **remember** the days former, in which, having been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings.

After your eyes opened, and you came to faith, you experienced conflict, combat. You were tested and experienced various forms of suffering. You didn't come to Jesus as Messiah and continue with an easy life. You experienced persecution, rejection, pain, struggle. But you accepted it willingly, as a sacrifice to Christ. That's what pilgrims do.

What sort of struggles? Verse 33 tells us.

Partly, they endured being shamed publicly with reproaches and tribulation. Reproaches: These were Jews who were humiliated and shamed and exposed to both reproaches and actions against them. They were insulted or disgraced, taunted, and had their reputations destroyed. From the perspective of the first century Jews, Hebrew believers in Jesus were considered apostates, deceivers, traitors. They soon received the title *the Notzrim*, the Nazarenes.

If you want to keep your reputation, and maintain respect from family and friends, and you want this at all costs, then Christianity is not for you. The faith of the Messiah brings a sword within family and friends, and if you are not willing to love Jesus more than closest family, you have not yet valued Him above all things.

**Heb 13:13** Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

**Phi 1:29** For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

**2 Timothy 3:12** Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Tim. 3:12)

But they also experienced this humiliation through tribulations such as personal loss, and he describes those in verse 34.

The other part is that they became sharers, companions, partners, loyal to those who were being treated that way. Why was that also an act of public humiliation? Because if you visited the persecuted believer in prison, if you helped with the burial of a believer, if you visited the home of the destitute Christian, you were publicly marking yourself as being one of them. Often those imprisoned or executed were not given food in prison by the state or given a burial by the state, so it was up to believers to do those things. But if the persecuting authorities wanted to know where more believers were, all they needed to do was watch to see who came to visit believers in prison, or who came to collect the body for burial. Those brave believers were giving up their names, reputations, and futures for the sake of the body of Christ.

For that reason, the book of Acts says that after Stephen had been killed by stoning, "devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. (Acts 8:2). The devout, not the timid and half-hearted carried Stephen to his burial. It's why Paul told Timothy: **2Ti 1:8** Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God,

**2Ti 1:16** The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain;

So the writer then shows in verse 34 how his readers endured these two acts of public humiliation.  
34 for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods

First, you had compassion on me, says the writer. Now because of some differing Greek texts, some versions are going to say, you had compassion on the prisoners. The manuscript family behind the NKJV has it as “my chains”. Likely, the writer was known personally to the readers. Now some have taken this to mean evidence that this must be Paul writing. But if you look at chapter 13:23, we read that Timothy had just been released from prison. Timothy was never in prison in the lifetime of Paul, so it makes it unlikely that this is Paul. But it is fairly certain that others from Paul's circle: Silas, Barnabas, John Mark, Luke, and Timothy were imprisoned sometime after Paul's execution between 62 and 66.

But then look at the remarkable way they endured the public humiliation of affliction: they joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods

When their houses or possessions were confiscated, stolen, or forcibly removed, they accepted it with joy. These were their possessions, and they were stolen, illegally taken, but they accepted these losses as gains. This might have been in Rome, when the Jews were expelled for a time, possibly because of this controversy. But it could have been in other cities. These Hebrew believers joyfully accepted loss of homes, loss of saved money, loss of a certain lifestyle they had once enjoyed.

How could they do that? knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. (Heb. 10:34)

These Hebrew believers knew that loss for Christ was permanent gain. What is taken away for the sake of Christ is recompensed.

29 So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's,

30 "who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time-- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions-- and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mk. 10:29-30)

11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:11-12)

**Act 5:41** So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.

This is not a normal response if your life is wrapped up in this world. If your life is really about this world's possessions, being admired and stylish in the eyes of the world, then losing reputation, and losing possessions is losing everything. And if you were threatened with that loss, you would not accept it for Christ's sake. You'd make some kind of rationalisation, some kind of outward compromise, so as to keep those things which are your real treasure.

Some people I know could live in an airport. Because everything they really love is found there: designer watches, restaurants, fragrances, gadgets, clothes, jewellery, access to great holidays, the status of being wealthy or powerful, and cool cars in the parking lot. Most of what they value is right there. And that's pretty pathetic, and shabby, by the Bible's standard – laying up treasures on earth, where they decay, and are lost and stolen.

A believer can hold that stuff loosely, because he is after permanent possessions, ultimate pleasures, lasting joys.

Now the main command here is: remember those days. Remember your commitment in those days. Think about what you endured. Reflect on your loyalty to the faith. Reflect on the joy you had even while losing everything. Reflect on how heavenward your thinking was.

These believers were wavering, thinking about turning back. So the writer essentially says, think back to how you were when you were at your best.

We can't always be at our best all the time. But we can remember when our faith was stronger, and our love was in its spring season, and our hope was single-minded.

Some Christians think back to better times and all they do is get discouraged. "You should have known me when I used to be committed". But that is not how the Bible expects us to use memory. We are supposed to think, "Yes, there have been seasons when I seemed to mount up with wings like an eagle. If I have in the past, I may certainly do so again, since I have grown in knowledge since then. I've given up a lot for the Lord, and I wouldn't take back a cent of it." Remember, that was you, not someone else. Stop being nostalgic about the past, and be encouraged by it. You have done acts of faith and hope for Christ. More lies ahead.

Persevering Pilgrims need to remember their willing sacrifices. Now that leads to a second action:

## **II. Refuse to Forfeit Your Reward**

35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: 37 "For yet a little while, *And* He who is coming will come and will not tarry. 38 Now the just shall live by faith; But if *anyone* draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him."

Therefore: because you have sacrificed so much, do not cast away your confidence. Don't now turn your back on what you have trusted for so long. Don't draw back. These are all the opposites of faith: draw near and hold fast, and the opposites are draw back and cast away.

If you draw back, if you cast away your confidence, you lose the reward, you forfeit the promise, you incur the displeasure of God.

In Hebrews, warnings against apostasy are given for two reasons. They are given to keep true believers persevering. They are the warning signs of the hairpin bend ahead and the need to stay on the road of faith. True believers see the sign, understand its meaning and stay on the road of faith. Even though outcomes are certain in God's mind, God ordains means during time to make sure they come to pass. God tells us to pray for things He knows we will receive. And God tells us to avoid things He knows we will not face.

The second reason is to warn those unbelievers who are becoming over-familiar with the truth from turning away before they have trusted Christ. These almost believers can be either the first, second, or third soil in Jesus' parable of the soils. They might still be actively saying no to the truth, even though and they are very familiar with it. They might be those who think they have accepted it, but have only accepted it in the most superficial part of their being, but they have not trusted Christ at the core of

their being, where idols are replaced with the true and living God. They might be those who think they have accepted it, and even appear to be bearing fruit and serving and teaching, but the deadly weeds of worldliness and selfishness live there too.

But all three of them will at some point turn away. Soil one will simply continue on as an infidel. Soils two and three will either simply abandon the faith and return to the world, or they will continue to claim membership with God's people while believing and teaching a false gospel. Either way, they become apostate: those, who like Judas, claim membership with God's people at some point, but turn and fall away into denial of Christ. The fall away from a professed faith, though not from an actual possessed faith.

Here's how these warnings work for unbelievers. Sometimes warnings against apostasy cause a second or third soil unbeliever to become a true, fourth soil believer. He has gone for some years, blending into the crowd, speaking the lingo, singing the songs, maybe even baptised, serving in church. But then the Word confronts him with the true depth of true faith, the pure gold quality of faith, and he is convicted that this is not him. He sees a contrast between a true believer and himself, and only his pride keeps him from coming out and admitting it. But if his pride is crushed by truth and humility, he makes it clear: I've been an almost-Christian for many years, but God has done a work of grace in my heart, and I want Him!

If you hold fast your confidence, there is according to verse 35, great reward. Verse 36 tells us that there is a promise to those who endure, who persevere: He who is coming will come and not tarry.

When He comes His reward is with Him. I want that reward that nothing and no one in this world can give. But it is very possible to lose a reward.

**2Jo 1:8** Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.

What can be worse than to give up all kinds of things for Christ, to refuse the devil's bait, to endure persecution, loss, reproach, rejection, to forego the world's accolades, but then to turn and give it all up before you have reached the end. This is why Paul wrote that we should not grow weary in doing good.

In Pilgrim's Progress, the pilgrims find two travelers asleep on the Enchanted Ground: Heed-less and Too-Bold. Nothing can wake them from their slumber. Great-heart, the pilgrims' guide in Part II, explains that this is what happens when careless and heedless people go on pilgrimage. He says, "this Enchanted Ground is one of the last refuges that the enemy has to pilgrims. This is why it is, as you see, placed almost at the end of the way, and so it stands against us with the more advantage. For when, thinks the enemy, will these fools be so desirous to sit down, as when they are weary? and when so like to be weary, as when almost at their journey's end? Therefore it is, I say, that the Enchanted Ground is placed so near to the Land Beulah, and so near the end of their race."

It is just like Satan, that if he cannot rob you of your salvation, he would at least seek to rob you of all reward in the last lap. Or in the case of the almost-Christian, to let you live a life of professing self-denying Christianity so that you never enjoy this world, and then make sure you cast away any hope of the Gospel before you die. You lose on both fronts, and gain from neither.

A persevering pilgrim remembers the willing sacrifices, and so refuses to forfeit the reward, and that leads to a third action.

### III. Remain Steadfast in Your Faith

39 But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Here is the resolve of a pilgrim: we are not among those who draw back. We are those who live by faith, who believe to the saving of the soul. The pilgrim believes in his position in Christ, and has come this far, and is not going back, so pushes forward.

And he does so because he believes where he is going is better, superior, permanent, ultimate.

And if we are not sure what that looks like, chapter 11 is an entire chapter of examples of people who did not draw back, who did not cast away their confidence, but who drew near, and endured.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.

15 And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13-16)

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon titled, “The Christian Pilgrim” (The Works of Jonathan Edwards [Banner of Truth], 2:243-246). He wrote (p. 244):

God is the highest good of the [rational] creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.-- To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant [experiences] here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean.-- Therefore it [is fitting for] us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven, as it [is fitting for us] us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on, any thing else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?

The only hymn that Bunyan wrote opens with this stanza:

He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,  
Let him in constancy follow the Master.  
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent  
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Remember your sacrifices. Refuse to forfeit your reward. Remain steadfast in your faith.